

Culture on the 1990s Agenda

Richard Kurin

Who would have thought that culture, as a sign of group identity, would play a prominent and sometimes deadly role in world politics? Who would have thought that culture, as commodified knowledge, art, and image, would be the world's largest industry? In one form or another, culture has become central to politics and economics. Culture is on the agenda for the 1990s. What role is to be played by institutions concerned with understanding culture and educating large and broad publics?

The Politics of Culture

Talk to a politician about cultural issues a few years ago, and before the eyes glazed over, you'd likely get a reaction that placed culture in the realm of the frivolous, the romantic, or the obvious. No more. From ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, to family values in the United States, and a distinct society vote in Canada, culture is on the battlefield, in the news, and on the ballot. Culture has come to be seen as values, world views, and identities that may move world events, shatter states and forge new ones. This is not the "culture" of high society, the elite arts or commercial media. It is rather the culture of ordinary people as expressed in daily life, in the streets, the workplace, and the school yard.

As a political issue culture has emerged in public consciousness under the rubric of "multiculturalism," a term which has been used to describe 1) a *demographic situation* — a culturally diverse population; 2) a *policy* — equity in resource accessibility for different cultures and

their bearers; 3) an *ethic* — the comparable value of every culture; and 4) a *process* — the ways in which cultures interact within pluralistic societies and complex individual lives.

Debates over multiculturalism in all of these senses have defined a number of issues. The political question of the decade will be whether a multicultural state is possible, and if so, how? For public institutions the question is how to make multiculturalism part of institutional practice. And for students of society and civilization, the question is to what extent multiculturalism encourages or precludes larger sociocultural syntheses and unities. Each of these sets of issues — the political, the educational, and the evolutionary have their own history, and their own problems and tensions.

Culture and the Modern State. Modern Europe articulated the idea of nation in the mid-19th century by binding it to ideas of race, language, and land. Definitions of singular national cultural identities were attempted through scholarship in folklore, physical and cultural anthropology, philology, and other disciplines. Debates over the characteristics of these unicultural or monocultural national identities, from their costumes to their customs to the question of who is to be included in them, have never ceased.

Many Third World countries, emerging from colonial rule after World War II, knew they had to construct culturally diverse states — nations with different languages, different religions, and many ethnic and regional backgrounds. India, Indonesia, Kenya, and others had to face the issue of forging political unity from cultural diversity. As we know, the maintenance of a central government with a core civic culture has been difficult in these societies. Ethnic, religious, tribal, linguistic, and regional differences continue to challenge national civic cultures.

The industrialized nations, because of their histories, traditions of governance, and levels of

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literacy and education, were thought to be immune to pressures arising from cultural difference. Their stability was thought to result from their having made the transition from traditional and culture-bound societies to modern ones. Indeed, many political scientists have seen the culture of the folk as a survival, a kind of primordial identity subsumed by the modern state and the rise of the individual. When cultural identity figures in politics, it is often seen as an irrational, unpredictable force.

Yet this idea of progress is challenged by the fact that some of the societies most successful in making this modernizing and industrializing transition have experienced a strong surge of political conflicts apparently based upon religious, ethnic, and regional cultural identity. A recent study sponsored by the American Academy of Sciences (*Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family and Education*) found that religious fundamentalism has tended, worldwide, to emerge as a cultural reaction to modernism, not as a survival of long held and cherished folkways. But even the most modern of nations have not been spared from such conflict. Movements of immigrant and colonized populations, the resistance of previously subjugated peoples, and persistence of internal cultural and regional differences have challenged received ideas of nationhood. Efforts to redefine the state as multicultural have in some cases resulted in dissension, conflict, bigotry, and violence. Many nations seem to be under a cultural siege, threatened by the unreconstructed cultural diversity of their people. And thus, more and more the question is being asked — is a multicultural state possible?

According to the former ministers of culture of the republics in the former Soviet Union, the answer is no. On the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, those ministers warned about the pitfalls of cultural diversity lest it weaken the U.S. in the same way it had undermined the Soviet state.

It was at about the same time that debate on multiculturalism heated up in American public life. The so-called “culture wars” erupted in the media, in national institutions, and eventually in presidential politics. To conservative detractors, multiculturalism is a highly problematic ideology, ethically relativistic and ahistorical. In this critical view, Western, European, and Judeo-Christian culture have crystallized in the American historical experience to form a national culture characterized by civic pride, political stability,

economic success, and high moral ideals. They argue that “politically correct” history, bilingualism, ethnic particularism, funding of the national arts endowment, Hollywood portrayals of the family, and other activities were undermining the cultural unity and foundations of the nation. Some suggested that the way to deal with American cultural diversity would be to eliminate it, generally through the type of cultural assimilation associated with mainstream economic success. Others suggested that elimination of cultural diversity would involve a more coercive strategy of excluding people and ideas.

Cultural wars became an election issue. On the eve of the presidential election the celebrating crowd in Washington was told, “no more cultural wars. No more religious wars. No more cultural cleansing.” And in accepting the results, Bill Clinton interpreted his victory as among other things, a call “to bring our people together as never before so that our diversity can be a source of strength.” The Presidential Inaugural was termed “America’s Reunion” to explicitly celebrate the relationship between unity and diversity. And so the question, at least in the United States, would appear to turn away from whether or not the multicultural state is possible to the question of how to make it so.

Cultural Representation. Debates over multiculturalism often grow quickly around the public events and institutions through which a society’s culture is represented. Contending interpretations of history, understandings of the present, and visions of the future have been subjects for debate in these arenas. The bicentennial of Australian settlement in 1988 was a harbinger of the 1992 American (and Iberian) Columbus Quincentenary, as issues of the “discoverers” and “the discovered,” the glory and the gore, the celebration and the commemoration emerged in exhibits, programs, speeches, television programs, demonstrations, and counter-demonstrations. Japan’s ceremonials surrounding the installation of the Emperor and the commemoration of Pearl Harbor are also recent contexts for studying what Geoff White calls “the politics of remembering.”

The ways in which different cultural groups are remembered and presented is also being fought out in museum exhibits, textbooks, television programs, and magazine advertisements. Simply put, many cultural groups are upset with their lack of representation, or the skewed or prejudicial way in which they are represented, and they are using techniques of political persua-



Forums for multicultural encounters will continue to be invented as a way of grappling with social realities. Here at the 1992 Festival of American Folklife, New Mexican participants from various Pueblo and Plains Indian, Hispanic, Anglo, African American, and other backgrounds develop a multicultural way of expressing a new-found community spirit.
Photo by Jeff Tinsley, Smithsonian Institution

sion to do something about it. Public institutions are under increased scrutiny to be inclusive and positively value cultural diversity in hiring, programming, and audience outreach.

While generally accepting the ethic of multiculturalism many scholars in cultural studies have criticized the way its arguments are framed. According to some critics, proponents of multiculturalism endorse simplistic and essentialistic notions of cultural groups. Too often, advocates of culturally articulated groups argue as though they believe themselves to be naturally constituted — as discrete, unchanging species. Hence, they unwittingly accept and replicate scientifically unsupportable ideas of race and racial classification. As a social consciousness, this atomistic sort of multiculturalism avoids attention to social systems (such as capitalism and colonialism) and social identities (such as those based upon class, gender, region, occupation, and religion) which crosscut ethnic groups. It also ignores how individuals and communities have juggled, juxtaposed, synthesized, and compartmentalized various identities in daily contexts and over the course of history.

New Syntheses and Alternatives. In spite of internal difficulties, divisions, and debates, global institutions like the U.N. have moved in an unprecedented way to define new global consensus on standards for ethical conduct, human rights, and environmental policy. These are not merely agreements among nation-states, but to

an unprecedented degree seem to represent the opinion of people across the planet. A more united Europe, whatever the fate of the Maastricht Treaty, has emerged, and has subsumed aspects of sovereignty and national identity in favor of shared economic interest. New free trade zones proposed in North America and in other parts of the world are based not on similarities in cultural identities, but on participation in regional and global markets. Indeed, there is, as Emile Durkheim predicted almost a century ago, the emergence of a global culture tied to the industrial and post-industrial world. Made possible by telecommunication technologies, this new culture defines distinct codes, networks, and communities of individuals and institutions, many, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued, with a shared folklore.

But these new, emergent forms of global political and economic culture are not so universal or so entrenched as to preclude opposition. Often characterized as nativistic though not necessarily home grown, some of multiculturalism's opponents proclaim their own form of universalism. In the United States and in parts of Europe some analysts see new forms of Islamic transnationalism as alternative global visions and a threat to the new world order. Domestically, some Christian fundamentalist groups are seen in the same way, and indeed, they explicitly challenge the very notion of a new world order based upon secular economics. How much multicultur-

alism can the new global framework stand when faced with alternative, inimical systems? Does the acceptance of a multiculturalist ethic mean bringing systems opposed to its ideology into the tent?

The Economics of Culture

As culture has become a political problem, it has also been turned into an economic treasure. Cultural knowledge, artifacts, songs, stories, images, and representations are rapidly and increasingly being transformed into commodities. Culture, as such, is at the forefront of the global economy. Who is consuming whose culture for whose economic benefit and at what cost?

Culture as Tourist Industry. Counting tourism, or at least a good part of it, together with the arts and entertainment, culture is the largest industry in the world. Trillions of dollars a year are spent representing and selling culture.

Perhaps the largest cultural enterprise in the United States is the Disney Corporation. Millions of Americans learn about world cultures at Disneyland and Disneyworld where they see the pirate-like people of the Caribbean drinking, and pygmies of Africa rising out of a river to aim their spears at your body — with knives and forks presumably to follow. Only slightly less dismaying is Disney's "It's a Small World After All," a tableaux of cute, little, formulaically but differentially costumed doll-figures meant to represent all the world's people singing the same song — each in its own language. Ersatz and fakelore abound. One French intellectual, interviewed about Euro-Disney, aptly summarized, "they claim to present our folklore and culture, but they have taken it and returned it to us in an unrecognizable form." Similarly, cultural theme parks, costing millions of dollars, are proliferating — in Japan, Indonesia, China, Western Africa, the Caribbean, the U.S., and Europe.

Can touristic cultural theme parks be organized so that their representations do justice to those represented; so that the material benefits of tourism are not just exported or used to build more luxury high rise hotels but actually reach the people represented; so that such activities do not destroy local environments and community culture? Strategies to meet these goals have been developing under the rubrics of eco-tourism and cultural tourism. Increased efforts to achieve and balance three broadly desirable goals — cultural conservation, economic development, and environmental preservation — will define key cultur-

al policy concerns around the world over the next decade.

Indigenous Creations. Another aspect of the cultural economy is the international trade in the creations of folk and traditional communities the world over. Popular musicians make millions of dollars mining the music of South Africans, Cajuns, Latin Americans, and others. A contemporary cosmetic company bases its multi-million dollar business on folk potions and ethnoaesthetics. Pharmaceutical companies work with shamans and healers to develop new drugs and treatments. Scholars, writers, and artists make a healthy living by writing about or appropriating the wisdom and knowledge of "their" people. Increasingly, folk cultural knowledge, wisdom, and art are going to be repackaged, made and marketed for profit, and distributed far beyond their traditional audiences. The issues involving the kinds and uses of property — intangible and tangible, individual and community, ownership and usufruct — continue to emerge as the industrial and post-industrial economy appropriates the creativity of traditional cultures. If the technology, knowledge, and networks are made available, some of this may occur under the control of the communities that produce this culture.

Cultural Markets. Mass production and mass marketing are designed for products that are the same for all consumers. Making everyone modern through advertising, propaganda, and other discursive forms has been a long term goal of industrial economics — whether capitalist or socialist. But mass producers are increasingly aware of cultural diversity in the marketplace. More salsa than ketchup is now eaten in U.S. households; Hindi film rentals in New York are a big business; a *halal* grocery and butchery are necessary institutions in several Detroit-area communities. In their search for new markets, producers have realized they have to be responsive to local needs. And they may have to compete with local producers whose niche in the local market is carved out by attention to cultural needs and aesthetics. The market has at once become more homogeneous — penetrated by internationally produced goods available everywhere, and at the same time increasingly customized for local consumption. Apple and IBM can sell their computers everywhere, but need a variety of script and language packages. Marketing research, needs assessment, and ethnographic fieldwork are likely to become increasingly entwined, as the interpenetration of local and global goods brings culturally diverse popula-

tions together in complex patterns of cultural-economic exchange. Global businesses will have to become more aware of the culture of their products, their markets, and their audiences; local producers will become increasingly sophisticated about creating new products and penetrating new markets.

The Challenge for Cultural Institutions

What role can public cultural institutions concerned with the study, documentation, and conservation of culture play in this political and economic context?

We face several problems. One concerns our own standing and expertise as professionals. Everyone knows something about culture, especially one's own. This makes public understanding of cultural expertise problematic. In American public discourse it is difficult to separate out folk sociology, folk folklore, and folk anthropology from their disciplinary varieties. Key terms — such as “society,” culture,” “tradition,” and “community” — are used by much of the population, journalists, politicians, and experts with considerable slippage of meaning.

While scholarly and scientific studies have much to contribute, they have generally failed to penetrate public understandings. Popularly, sociology is often reduced to psychology, history to biography, culture to human nature. The social sciences, the humanities, and the arts are largely marginalized and trivialized in our educational systems, which continue to be informed by a resilient anti-intellectualism. Disciplinary understandings, which once held hope of escaping ethnocentrism, have been shown to be heavily influenced by it. The idea of race in the United States, for example, which should have been drastically reformulated in light of social and natural science findings, nonetheless persists among the public and its leaders in its 19th century form.

This is not just a communication problem. The human studies disciplines have in a reflexive moment undercut some of their own legitimacy. They have generally remained aloof from national and international debates on fundamental cultural issues. They have failed to work closely with the communities they study on matters of pressing political and economic concern.

Scholars and museum curators face a fundamental challenge. We claim a special empathy for, understanding of, and ethical relationship with the people we study and represent. But if we are so intimately and meaningfully involved,

those people should be flocking to us for knowledge and insight. They, the studied and represented, should be coming to our museums, attending our professional meetings, enrolling their children in our courses, reading our books, and becoming professionals in our fields. In the U.S. this is not happening. The participation of African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, and Asian Americans in the cultural studies and museum fields is stunningly low.

Emerging Cultural Policy Needs

What are we going to need for a world in which increasing weight is put on culture?

I think the future of the cultural field is to be found in a clearer focus on situated scholarship. Research and analysis need to be situated in contexts — historical and contemporary, local and global — and presented to affected polities and institutions. We need research work on issues that crosscut disciplines, populations, and genres as we have traditionally defined them. And we need the active involvement and engagement of community and lay scholars in this effort — people who can bring to the field new understandings, assumptions, approaches, and associations.

We need research on the multicultural state, on comparative cultural politics, on cultural economics, on multicultural lives, on transnational cultural flows, on cultural processes associated with immigration, acculturation, urbanization, and the relationship between culture, environmental preservation, and development. We need stronger scholarship if it is to stand the scrutiny of the audiences who can actually think about and use our work. This means students and professionals trained in several fields and methodologies. And it also means the penetration of cultural work into other disciplines — lawyers who work on intellectual and cultural property rights issues need ethnomusicological research to understand the creation and ownership of songs; pharmacologists who will work with rainforest healers and shamans need folklore research to understand ethnobotanical knowledge, and so on.

We have to combine research more closely with education and public service. We have major work to do in developing teaching materials and upgrading teacher training to reflect the complexity of cultural issues students will face. We have to use the full range of new media and communicative forms to transmit our ideas so that younger and broader publics can entertain



Maroon leaders from Jamaica, Suriname, French Guiana, Colombia, and Texas met each other for the first time at the 1992 Festival. Joined here by Rev. Jesse Jackson, the opportunity provided an occasion to discuss the cultural history and continuity of these communities, and their common concerns. *Photo by Jeff Tinsley, Smithsonian Institution*

them. If kids can sit for hours in front of a video game trying to get Mario to save the princess from the dragon, we have to figure out ways to engage them with the same intensity in quests for cultural knowledge, understanding, and appreciation.

We need to be more creative about how a diversity of understandings are shared, discussed, and debated. Grassroots communities throughout the world cannot afford to communicate through Ph.D. dissertations, the meetings of professional organizations, or documentary films — the time lag is too long and the audiences too small and insignificant. Increasingly public cultural institutions themselves will have to become forums for cultural conversations. Museums, libraries, and universities — in their current form, as well as in electronically networked, “virtual” forms — will have to serve town, national, and global conversations, if they are to continue to merit public support. The conversations them-

selves will need to become less of an authoritative monologue, as central institutions enable dialogue and the increase of knowledge by those formerly seen as peripheral.

The federal investment in this process has not been made. The resources put toward multiculturalism are minute. Public institutions have failed to connect enshrined ideas of culture — what it is and whose it is — to an increasingly multicultural America. Funds and commitments for training people and supporting professionals in the cultural studies areas are lacking. And yet, in a changing world, where culture looms larger and larger in political and economic life, the need for this investment is greater. Developing America’s cultural economy in a just way and developing public understanding of the nation’s cultural life seem not only worthwhile goals, but urgent ones that require swift and decisive action.